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ABSTRACT

To determine how college students evaluated their classmates' writing and whether their critiquing was effective, a study examined the critique sheets of 10 students, each of whom responded to two argumentative essays written by their classmates. Results suggested that student readers did not always impose the constraints necessary for providing their classmates adequate feedback and that students were too accepting of unfocused or insubstantial essays. The students' ability to compensate for the deficiencies of a student often seemed to interfere with their ability to provide constructive criticism. Possibly their inability or unwillingness to identify communication gaps (incoherence) stemmed from their development of a repertoire of reading strategies that were effective for reading relatively coherent materials, such as required textbooks, but were inappropriate for reading student essays. In their critiques, the students read papers that mimicked the style of professional writers. As a result, they gave the writers of such papers very little useful feedback. This suggests that students must be trained to recognize incoherence and fogginess, and the training must be rigorous enough to counter conditioned expectations about the nature of written texts. Teachers can train students to read classmates' papers by providing them with examples of the assigned genre and by reviewing papers with the class, pointing out their limitations as well as their strengths. (HOD)

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Freedom, Restraint, and Peer Group Interaction

Peer critiquing has become an established pedagogical method in composition programs across the country. Students break up into small groups, usually composed of four or five students, exchange essays, and receive feedback on them before the essays are revised and submitted to the teacher for a grade. The approach has been explained and defended by composition specialists such as Kenneth Bruffee, Thom Hawkins, Peter Elbow, and James Moffett.[1] Their defenses generally center around the opportunities provided by the technique for confrontation with real audiences. Students, in responding to classmates' essays, provide the feedback needed to produce effective revisions.

We still, however, know very little about the nature of the interaction which takes place in small group critique sessions. We are badly in need of empirical studies to substantiate the usefulness of the approach. John Clifford, in his examination of the effects of what he calls a "collaborative pedagogy," found that students who were introduced to a collaborative composing method, including free writing and small group interaction, had significantly greater gains on a holistically scored writing sample than students who did not employ these techniques.[2] It is not clear from Clifford's study that the critiquing sessions were responsible for the gains made, however, since the treatment Clifford used consisted of a variety of techniques. Is peer critiquing an effective method? How do students read their classmates' writing? These were questions I set out to answer in an exploratory study I conducted this past fall in my freshman composition course. I examined the critique sheets of ten students from three different groups each of whom responded to two argumentative essays written by members

CS206887

of their group. My conclusions, though tentative, suggest that student readers do not always impose the constraints necessary for providing their classmates adequate feedback. Often they are too accepting of unfocused or insubstantial essays, in part, because they expect writing to be focused and coherent and therefore see beyond or compensate for confusion or incoherence.

For Peter Elbow, one of the advantages of peer critiquing is that it minimizes the authority of the teacher. In a chapter of Writing Without Teachers called "Why the Teacherless Class Helps Make Writing Better," Elbow explains that fellow students are valuable respondents to a paper because they are equal to rather than superior to the writer. Students read to understand rather than judge and so are in a position to be genuinely affected by the words of a writer in a way the teacher is not. Students are more likely to engage in what Elbow in his later book, Writing With Power calls "reader-based feedback." Reader-based feedback, unlike criterion-based feedback, is affective rather than judgmental. It explains to a writer what a piece of writing does rather than how it measures up.

According to Elbow, student readers, non-experts, provide valuable feedback because in expressing their frustration in attempting to understand the essay of a classmate, they are indicating to a writer places where communication breaks down. Elbow says,

> So one of the genuinely valuable aspects of the reading you get from the teacherless class is that in a sense it is inferior: it will have "mistakes," the reader will miss some meanings that a teacher would get. The most obvious example is that these readers give you better evidence of what is unclear in your writing. They're not just telling you the places where they think your writing is awkward because it doesn't conform to their idea of what good writing is. They are people telling you where

> you actually confused them. A diverse group of readers constitutes an ideal array of "channels" for "sending your message across." You find out where there is too much static or where the message is too weak. Sometimes someone who knows very little about the subject is most useful here (pp. 127-8).

In the same brief chapter Elbow identifies a very different reason why student readers often provide useful feedback to their peers. He focuses here on the strengths of student readers rather than their limitations. They can identify a message which may be submerged in incoherence. He says students are sometimes better able than teachers to "hear ideas, feelings, and nuances that are only partially encoded in the words. They hear the message behind the fog" (p. 129).

Elbow provides very little evidence to support his descriptions of the ways in which students read student essays, and the two reasons he gives for the effectiveness of peer evaluation seem contradictory. Are some students able to identify confusing passages and others able to penetrate the fog? Are most students able to do both? It would seem that responding to confusing passages by expressing confusion is a reaction quite different from responding to confusing passages by making sense of them despite their difficulty.

I found, in examining my data, that students more frequently performed the latter activity. They more frequently penetrated the fog than indicated places in a paper where communication breaks down. Their ability to compensate for the deficiencies of a student essay too often seemed to interfere with their ability to provide constructive criticism. Their feedback provided their classmates too much freedom and not enough constraint. This was perhaps partially a result of their hesitation to be critical. They did not want to hurt their classmates' feelings. Quite possibly, though,

their inability or unwillingness to identify communication gaps stemmed from their development of a repertoire of reading strategies which are effective for reading relatively coherent materials such as required textbooks but inappropriate for reading student essays. We perhaps have to introduce students to the "genre" of the student essay if we are going to ask them to read student papers meaningfully and usefully.

Students who comprised the sample were enrolled in a freshman composition course this past quarter. All had attended a critique session in which first drafts of an argumentative essay were read, critiqued in writing, and discussed. Students in groups of three or four exchanged drafts, read them silently, wrote responses on critique sheets I had prepared in advance, and then discussed the papers. These ten students were selected because they attended the session, because they prepared written critiques of at least two essays, and because they included their critique sheets in their folders at the end of the quarter. They tended, therefore, to be the more conscientious students. Unlike some of their classmates who were less responsible, these students took the critique sessions seriously and seemed genuinely interested in helping the other members of their group improve their writing.

The critique sheet for the argumentative essay contained the following items: 1) State the main idea of the essay in a complete sentence; 2) Identify the audience for whom the essay is intended; 3) Identify the evidence used to support the main point; 4) Is the argument convincing? Why or why not?

I designed the sheet so that it would be as uncomplicated as possible and so that it would be useful in assessing accurate description as well as critical evaluation of an essay. I wanted to determine if students could identify a main idea, the audience for whom the essay was intended, the

evidence used to support the main idea, and if they could come to some evaluation of the essay based on the appropriateness of the thesis statement and the evidence for the intended audience.

Very few of the critique sheets contained critical comments. When responding to strong essays, students seemed able to recognize the strengths of the papers and to identify its main idea, its audience, and the evidence used to support the main idea. Too often, though, they reacted enthusiastically to essays which lacked focus or were poorly organized. Almost all of the papers that came under their scrutiny were said to be convincing.

In a few instances students did seem to recognize that an essay did not provide sufficient evidence to support the central contention. Several students noted on their critique sheets that an essay on nuclear energy, for instance, provided little specific detail. One commented that the student had not provided enough evidence. Another felt that "he doesn't explain what he talks about well enough." The writer took the comments to heart and changed his topic. His new essay, a discussion of automobile safety, was much more solid and much more convincing. Another respondent, in critiquing a rather emotional complaint against the grading system, pointed out that the student had provided "no real evidence" and included too much "personal opinion." The student's revision was much more substantial.

In general, though, students, even the ones I considered to be strong readers and writers, seemed unable to recognize less blatant problems, especially in papers which were written with a tone of authority or which provided specific detail. If students sensed that a student had done some research or knew a lot about a subject, they tended to compensate for the limitations of the paper by identifying its deep structure rather than commenting on incoherence closer to the surface. They located a main idea

when that idea was not entirely obvious or overlooked extraneous material. In other words, they read papers which mimicked the style of professional writing as if it were professional writing. The result was that they gave the writers of such papers very little useful feedback.

Respondents to a paper on alcoholism, for instance, found a rather incoherent and unfocused essay to be both coherent and convincing. The essay, apparently a pastiche of ideas, maybe even whole paragraphs, borrowed from a reference source, perhaps a sociology textbook, reads as follows:

> The families of alcoholics are subject to a variety of problems. Many alcoholics get into trouble with the law, are unable to work steadily at their jobs, and are hospitalized. They also behave violently toward family members and are unexcepted in social activities that would involve all family members. The family members of alcoholics are likely to isolate themselves from others out of shame. The day to day unpredictability of the family makes it hard for long term planning and also lowers morale in the family. Usually the spouse of the alcoholic takes the role of the alcoholic besides their own. The children who have to learn adult roles from their parents are caught in the middle. They have one parent to learn from who is an alcoholic and the another who is playing the adult roles of both sexes simultaneously.
>
> Abnormal drinking by a family member was thought to lead to desertion, separation, divorce, neglect of children, anti-social and illegal adult behavior, and delinquency of the children. This has been subject to more investigation lately. This hypothesis has thus been thrown out for several reasons. First at the time this hypothesis was held most firmly the most socially visible deviant drinkers were lower class persons. With the recognition that there are social class differences in values, attitudes social organization.
>
> Disturbances in the family relationships and/or personality interact with drinking to give rise to further disturbances in family relationships and in personality integration, and to further drinking.
>
> Statistics gathered from divorce records indicate that drinking per se commonly was given as a reason for the marital disruption. The spouses of deviant drinkers tend to use drinking as the symbol of all their marital problems and the deviant drinkers tend to respond to most aspects of marital conflict by drinking.
>
> From reading all the data on abnormal drinking and the family, it can be concluded that those who develop drinking problems at some time during their lives are more likely not to get married and if they do many are more likely to be involved in marital failures. The drinking problems of those who married tended to develop during marriage and tended to be a large factor in the termination of the marriage.
>
> Family conflict is intensified and blurred when drinking is involved. Drinking itself interferes with the performance of the family roles by the drinker during the time the person is drunk which brings anxieties to the rest of the family. The family members try to restructure the family organization and function only to bring about more disruptive behavior in all

family members. New problems emerge that are met by more drinking. The drinking is regarded as socially undesireable and the family's shame and guilt add to the disintegration of the family. The conflict may heighten and drinking becomes more frequent and the behavior of the drinker more deviant. The performance of extra family roles becomes impaired. The drinker may have problems holding down a job, or problems with the police. Illness caused by drinking may put additional economic strain on the family. The wife may become less adequate as a mother due to anxieties about her marriage which are due to additional demands made by the alcoholic or from the lack of self-sufficiency of the children. The children may withdraw from their friends and so do poorly in school. The family then becomes preoccupied with the problem of drinking and uses it as a scapegoat. The community may be drawn into the family situation adding more complexities to the family problem. This may also cause problem drinking children.

Ideas in the essay do not flow into one another smoothly and the essay is difficult to follow. The first sentence suggests that the student will discuss the effects of alcoholism on family members, but at times it seems as if alcoholism itself is the main topic. The vocabulary and sentence structure of the piece are relatively sophisticated and the student has clearly done some research. He has not assimilated the material, however; he has not made the message his own. Paragraph two, for example, seems to have been lifted in its entirety from the student's source and does not support his main contention.

The two students who critiqued this essay found it to be convincing even though they each identified different main points and different subordinate ideas. One student identified the main idea as "The problem of alcoholics" and saw the topic of the effects of alcoholism on the family to be a sub-topic of the main topic. She found the argument to be convincing because "There is a lot of solid believable information about alcoholics, their problems, and affects." The second student found it to be convincing because it "has a lot of evidence." This student identified the main idea as "Effects of alcoholism on an alcoholic's family" and identified the evidence used to support the thesis as "Divorce; family strain; various problems; children lacking proper family life; solutions."

Both students seemed to have been taken in by the language of the essay. Both created coherence out of incoherence. The responses of the second student, who is both a strong writer and reader, were particularly ingenious. The outline he suggested for the essay does describe fairly accurately the topics covered in the essay. He was able to identify the deep structure of the piece. Perhaps, though, the fact that neither student was able to state the main idea in the form of a sentence is an indication that their victory over confusion was not total.

Responses to an essay on fast foods by members of a different group of students reveals a similar tendency to overlook extraneous material and poor organization and to identify the message behind the fog. The tone of this essay on fast foods is a confident one. The student has provided plenty of detail:

> The art of preparing a home cooked meal is rapidly becoming extinct in modern society. Very seldom do the aroma's of freshly baked bread, apple pie, or turkey fill the air of a family home. Spending more than one hour on preparing a meal is unthought of by many, except on holidays such as Thanksgiving or Christmas. In today's world its a quick trip down the street to pick up hamburgers, fries, and a coke to go.
>
> America has become a country of fast food chains. Wendy's, Arbie's, Burger Chef, and MacDonalds are all valid examples. Each have a major goal of supplying a quick meal at a reasonable price. Designed to serve the student and worker who have no time for lunch, they have rapidly grown in size. Today these restaurants not only serve the person with a hectic schedule, but their family also. From the time we are old enough to watch television our attention is drawn toward such places. Who, on a Saturday morning, hasn't seen Burger Chef and Jeff, Burger King, and the very famous Ronald MacDonald and crew. Placed in commercials to spark the young persons interest, these characters, animated or not, are a highly profitable means of advertising.
>
> A visit to a fast food restaurant can be a very interesting experience. Many have driven through isles for those who wish to place an order directly from their vehicle. Speaking through a microphone you state your menu selection, which can be picked up at the next window in a matter of minutes. If you choose to go inside one of the first things you will notice is the color coded interior. Everything matches from the plastic seats to the tile floor. A large counter with a complete menu on the wall behind it lines one side of the room. Smiling, or supposedly smiling, faces are eagerly waiting to take your order. There is the Whopper, Big Mac, Quarter Pounder, French Fries, Shake, and Fun Meal with a "toy surprise" for the children.

Once your selection is made a usually reasonable price is displayed on the cash register and your meal is delivered in a mass of styrofoam and paper containers. Despite its delivery however, it is usually a rather tasty combination.

After observing the speed of delivery in fast food restaurants the question may arise if the food is anything but tasty. Does it actually contain any nutritional value? To begin, the basic food items must be frozen and shipped by truck to their given location. It's very obvious that each day much of the food is prepared well in advance so it must contain preservatives to insure freshness. Food which is preserved usually contains a high salt content which leads to High Blood Pressure, a major health problem of American Society. I would like to state that fast foods do contain a certain amount of nutritional value. However, becoming caught up in the "Fast Food Fad" could lead to serious future problems.

America has become the home of the "Junk Food Junky." Overindulgence has led to obesity, hypertension, and high blood pressure. The educating of our children to the importance of nutritional needs, along with the change of eating habits to more home cooked meals and less fast foods could lead to a healthier, happier, society.

The three students who responded to this paper all identified the main idea to be that fast foods are not nutritious. All three pointed to the material contained in paragraph four as evidence to support the point. Two of the three students found the argument to be convincing. The third found it to be convincing "to an extent," but was unhappy that the student mentioned "frozen foods," a topic this student found to be irrelevant. Not one student mentioned that the essay provides little evidence to support the central contention or that the student organized her material ineffectively. Not one mentioned that the essay contains extraneous material.

Student readers of these two essays demonstrated remarkable skill in uncovering the student's submerged message. In a sense they rewrote the essays in order to make sense of them. Their reluctance to criticize the essays might have stemmed from an unwillingness to make negative comments about a classmates' paper. They may also have simply been conforming to the dictates of the critique sheet which asked that they identify a main idea and support for that idea but did not ask that they identify confusing passages or "static." Another possible explanation for their responses, though, is that their prior reading experiences had led them to believe that

texts are coherent and well-focused. Their lack of familiarity with the genre of incoherent texts interfered with their ability to recognize writing problems.

Frank Smith's description of the nature of the reading process helps explain the effects of prior reading experiences upon the reading of a new text. Smith, in Understanding Reading, argues that reading is primarily a process of looking for meaning rather than simply decoding words. Meaning is recuperated from a text through the active participation of the reader. By posing questions and making predictions on the basis of prior knowledge and experience, readers create meaning. One component of the experience a reader brings to the printed page is a familiarity with other writing. Smith says, "If prediction is the basis for the comprehension of written language, then obviously an important part of the nonvisual information of readers must be familiarity with the conventions and unique characteristics of the different forms that written language takes. The more one knows about language, the easier it will be to read, and thus to learn to read."[3]

Student readers expect their reading to be meaningful. They expect to find messages rather than static. Their prior reading experiences have introduced them to texts which are reasonably well-organized and focused. Often student readers approach their textbooks in a totally accepting way. They read to absorb rather than to evaluate. Students, especially good students, learn very early that they will receive high grades if they learn to identify main ideas and subordinate ideas and if they remember these ideas on examinations. The reading histories of most of our students make it unlikely that they will suddenly and automatically become good readers of their classmates' essays. They must be trained to recognize incoherence and fogginess, and the training must be rigorous enough to counter their conditioned expectations about the nature of written texts.

I will be the first to admit that the critique sheet I asked students to fill out encouraged them to identify submerged messages and to overlook writing problems. In the composition course I am teaching this quarter I will explicitly ask students to point out gaps, inconsistencies, irrelevancies. They will be asked to identify material which is not present in an essay but which should be, or they will be asked to locate confusing passages or insubstantial evidence.

Teachers can also train students to read classmates' papers by providing them with examples of the genre and by going over them with the class, pointing out the limitations as well as the strengths of the papers. This can be accomplished with the entire class or with small groups. A useful approach would be to ask students to make suggestions for revision or perhaps to revise the paper themselves. Teachers might also show their classes various drafts of a student essay in order to point out the changes a student made as ideas became more focused and less confused. It might also be useful to make students aware that often the writing of professional writers lacks focus or contains confusing passages. Clarity is a goal that is difficult to achieve.

We need more research on the relationships between readers and writers in peer group interaction. We need to study larger numbers of students in a variety of critiquing situations before we will be able to make meaningful generalizations about the ways in which students read their classmates' papers. I will continue to use the group inquiry approach. I will do so cautiously, however, and I will continue to build into my composition course a mechanism whereby I, too, provide feedback before an essay is revised for a grade. The student writers of the essays quoted above might not have revised their essays at all had I not pointed out some of the problems the members of their group had overlooked. The mechanism I have developed is the group conference

whereby students present their papers to a group of about eight readers, including me, and receive feedback before shaping the essay into a finished piece. I find that student readers benefit from the comments I make on papers they have read far too acceptingly. I would like to think that my comments are valuable not because I pose as an authority figure, not because I am overly judgmental, but because I have had years of exposure to the genre of student essays and I have developed effective strategies for reading them.

NOTES

[1] See Kenneth Bruffee, "Collaborative Learning: Some Practical Models," College English, 34 (February 1973), 634-43; Thom Hawkins, Group Inquiry Techniques for Teaching Writing (Urbana, Ill.: ERIC/NCTE, 1976); Peter Elbow, Writing Without Teachers (New York: Oxford University Press, 1973) and Writing With Power: Techniques for Mastering the Writing Process (New York: Oxford University Press, 1981); James Moffett, Teaching the Universe of Discourse (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1968).

[2] "Composing in Stages: The Effects of A Collaborative Pedagogy," Research in the Teaching of English, 15 (1981), 37-53.

[3] Understanding Reading: A Psycholinguistic Analysis of Reading and Learning to Read, second edition (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1978), p. 82.